ORHS grad Keith Akers: Radical action needed to sustain life on Earth (part two)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 21, 2026)

Carolyn Krause met Keith Akers, a 1967 Oak Ridge High School graduate, when Keith returned to Oak Ridge to give a talk on his 2023 book "Embracing Limits" to a Sunday school class at First Presbyterian Church. Carolyn and Keith's brother Paul Akers, who invited Keith, are members of the church. This article on Keith's book, which Carolyn has read, summarizes his views on human-caused environmental and climatic threats to life and the ways that humans, through simple living, can lessen the dangers.

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Keith Akers has a beef about the overgrazing by cattle of vast land areas – 750 million acres in the United States. He suggests that misguided land uses have damaging impacts on the environment and climate. He notes that combustion of diesel and other fossil fuels, which emits climate-altering greenhouse gases, plays a significant role in supporting the livestock industry.

He states that reforesting land freed up from livestock agriculture, especially if many people switch to plant-based diets, could prevent an imminent ecological collapse and the "sixth extinction" of many wild animal and plant species, as happened 66 million years ago when dinosaurs died off.

Keith's 2023 book *Embracing Limits: A Radical and Necessary Approach to the Environmental Crisis* points out that the biomass of wildlife that once dominated the Earth's surface has declined precipitously. It is greatly exceeded by the biomass of humans and the livestock they raise—mainly, cattle, pigs, chickens and turkeys. The forested land where wildlife once lived and a diverse array of plants once thrived has been taken over by humans. Millions of acres of deforested land are occupied by cities, suburbs, industrial plants, crops for humans and livestock, as well as farms and pastures for cattle grazing.

His book gives us plenty to worry about. He is concerned not only about the effects of oil burning on climate but also about the increasing costs of oil, which people of all income levels depend on for home heating and transportation.

"We are not literally going to run out of oil anytime soon," his book states. "Rather, the costs (whether political or economic) will continue to rise." Oil will always be affordable for people with money.

Other limits to growth of the U.S. economy are such environmental threats as deforestation, soil erosion and desertification, all partly caused by the growing cattle industry.

In addition, because of the depletion of soil and groundwater (needed to irrigate U.S. crops, only 20% of which are used for human food), we can expect more food and water shortages worldwide this century. And humans will continue to battle emerging infectious diseases (e.g., AIDS and COVID) and the ill health effects of pollution (microplastics, acid rain, heavy metals, industrial and wildfire emissions, radioactive waste and nitrogen fertilizers contaminating soil, air, rivers, streams and oceans).

To pursue global environmental sustainability by delaying the depletion of natural resources to maintain an ecological balance, Keith argues through references to several experts that the world's population of eight billion should be reduced to around two billion people by the end of the century. In addition, a smaller economy and degrowth strategies are needed.

Here are some of his recommendations for individuals, many of which freedom-loving citizens of capitalist democracies will likely resist. Adopt a plant-based diet. Limit the number of children you have (preferably no more than one child). Reduce consumption of merchandise, especially products you don't really need.

Live simply. Be aware that there are limits to growth and that the U.S. and other growth economies are driving worldwide environmental destruction. Support educating women worldwide (to reduce childbirths) and teaching nutrition science to all students in medical and public schools (e.g., eating plant-based foods

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is much healthier than eating beef, sugar and processed food). Recognize that personal sacrifices must be made in a time of crisis for the sake of the common good.

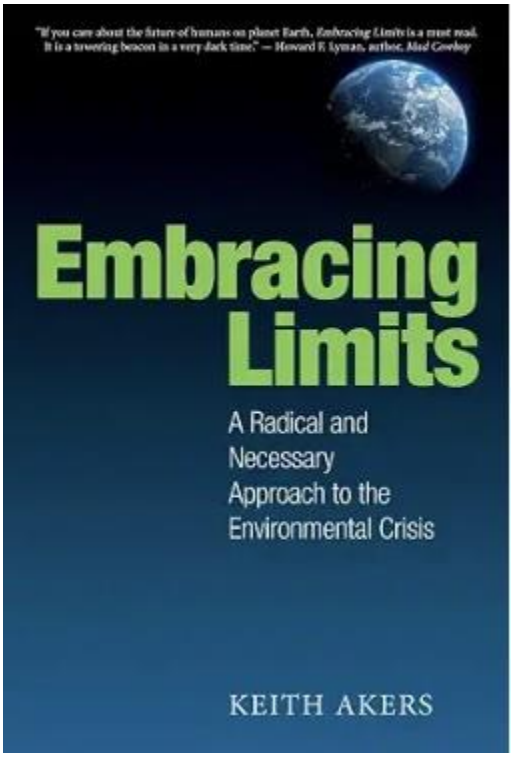
Keith supports recommendations for governments suggested by ecological economist Herman Daly and others. They include ending subsidies for the livestock industry, launching a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gas emissions, levying taxes on meat and carbon (e.g., coal mining and burning gasoline and diesel and jet fuel used for transportation), putting natural resources in public trusts and regulating their use, protecting and expanding wilderness areas and redistributing wealth through progressive income taxes and a basic income for the less fortunate.

The growth that Keith seeks is increased activism by folks who agree with his book's thesis: "Humanity needs to take radical action to protect the biosphere."

For more information, listen to Keith's talk at https://www.ktep.org/show/act-radio/2023-12-27/keith-akers-talks-about-simple-living-to-help-the-environment

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Thank you, Carolyn, for a look into the perception of Keith Akers on the future of our environment and his ideas of what can be done by simpler living.



Embracing Limits: A Radical and Necessary Approach to the Environmental Crisis by Keith Akers
(Courtesy of Carolyn Krause)

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Keith Akers gives a lecture on his "Embracing Limits" book to a Sunday School class at First Presbyterian Church at Oak Ridge. (Courtesy of Carolyn Krause)